

SCOTT COWEN

Tulane University:

HURRICANE KATRINA took more than 1,500 lives. Most of those people died in their homes because they could not escape, or they died trying to escape the flood waters. The hurricane submerged 80 percent of the parish, a land mass seven times the size of Manhattan. The flood lasted for fifty-seven days and destroyed over 160,000 homes and apartments. Katrina caused the largest metropolitan diaspora in the history of the United States, displacing more than 80 percent of the population. Prior to the storm, the population of New Orleans was 465,000; within two weeks of the storm, it was 10,000; today, it is about 225,000. Katrina led to 22 million tons of debris—more than enough to fill the Superdome thirteen times, or quadruple the amount of debris that resulted from the tragedy at the World Trade Center on 9/11.

I was on campus on August 29, 2005. Tulane University's hurricane preparedness plan calls for the president of the university, along with four or five other senior

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people, to remain on the campus in the event of a category four or five hurricane. I went to the designated place on campus thinking it would be just another storm and that we would be back in business again in a couple of days. When I heard on the news that the levees had been breached, I said to the five people with me that we probably ought to spend the night on campus and see what impact, if any, the breach of the levees would have. Within forty-eight hours, two-thirds of our uptown campus, which covers about 120 acres, was under water. We lost all communications—telephones, satellite phones, cell phones, computers—and there was no sewage system, no water, and no power. By the time we finally evacuated to Houston, Texas, on the Friday after the storm, Tulane University no longer existed.

Recovery

The three most important decisions affecting the recovery of the institution were made within twenty-four hours of our evacuation to Houston. The first of these was the decision to reopen the university, as previously scheduled, on January 17, 2006. That was a hubristic decision; at the time, we had no idea how we would do it, how much it would cost, who would do it, or how we would pay for it. But none of that mattered because we knew that if Tulane didn't open in January 2006, it would probably never open again. We had to announce the decision right away to give people confidence.

SCOTT COWEN is president of Tulane University. This article is adapted from the keynote address to the American Conference of Academic Deans luncheon, held in conjunction with the AAC&U annual meeting.



From Recovery to Renewal



The second decision we made was to continue to pay all faculty and staff for as long as possible. That decision cost the institution \$35 million per month, at a time when no money was coming in. But we knew that our faculty and staff were going through their own personal tragedies and that the last thing they needed was to be unsure about whether they were going to get paychecks. Moreover, we recognized that it is the people who make for great universities, and without those people you have nothing. Finally, the third decision we made was to reach out to the higher education community and to ask for help with our students.

After making those three crucial decisions, we started to focus on the January reopening. We thought that all we had to do was to restore all the buildings and the campus itself. It turned out, however, that the physical restoration of our campus was the simplest part of the entire task. What we did not immediately realize was that the rest of New Orleans was not functioning. We had to build a self-contained village in order to reassure people that there would be someplace to which they could return.

By late September we still did not know when the public school system would reopen, and our employees, now scattered in cities all over the world, were asking how they could return if there were no schools for their children to attend. We realized that one of the

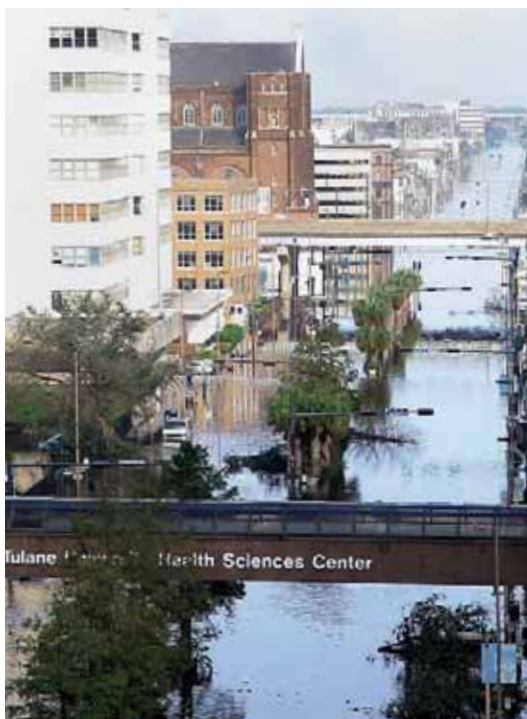
finest elementary schools in New Orleans, Lusher School, was right in our neighborhood. So we found the principal, brought her to Houston, and told her that we needed her to reopen the school by January 17, 2006. To make that possible, she told us she would need several teachers to plan the curriculum; that the school would have to be chartered; and that she would need money. We provided \$1.5 million, and we convinced the school board to charter the school. The school opened on January 17, 2006, with approximately one thousand students in attendance. About four hundred of those students were the sons and daughters of faculty and staff members at Tulane, Dillard, Xavier, and Loyola universities.

The next challenges we faced were housing and health care. When we learned that three thousand of our faculty, staff, and students did not know whether they had housing to return to, we decided to go into the housing market. We built modular housing on campus and bought an apartment building, but still it was not enough. So we leased a cruise ship with berths for two thousand people, bringing it from Israel and parking it on the Mississippi River. Everyone who came back had a place to live.

There was no health care available in New Orleans; all of the hospitals were closed. But we have a marvelous set of physicians in our health science center, one of whom, Karen DeSalvo, offered to set up three clinics across the city to provide care to anybody who needed it. Those free clinics, staffed by Tulane doctors and residents, continue to operate today.

During this period—September, October, November, and December 2005—the city of New Orleans was going through a terrible time. Tulane University is the largest employer in the city, so many of us began to take on major roles in the city itself. Asked to chair the community-wide effort to come up with a new plan for public education in the city, I spent as much time on public education initiatives as I spent on university issues. We also started a public service initiative that involved Tulane students, faculty, and staff in the recovery of New Orleans.

Tulane University reopened on January 17, 2006. Within three days, the population of the parish had increased by 20 percent. We had brought back the students, the faculty, the staff, and their families. And many businesses,



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especially the bars and restaurants, had timed their reopenings to coincide with ours. We built the village, and it turned out to be a pretty good village.

The Tulane University campus is completely free of water now, and every single building is up and running. In fact, since we wound up having to do about a quarter of a million dollars worth of construction and repairs, the campus looks better than it did before the storm. But the story goes beyond that. First of all, we survived Hurricane Katrina. At 80 percent of the pre-Katrina level, our current enrollment has exceeded expectations. Moreover, despite the fact that we were closed for half of it, last year was an extraordinarily strong research year. Although our faculty members were scattered across the country, they were still writing research grants. We also had a very strong fundraising year, despite the fact that we did not raise any money for the five months we were in the trenches building our village. And our endowment grew significantly. Finally, we formed lasting partnerships with the other local universities, and Tulane will continue to play a new and active role in New Orleans.

One of the reasons Tulane University survived Hurricane Katrina is that we were willing

to make bold decisions quickly. This is a lesson to be learned by all of us. At what pace do you make decisions? In a catastrophe, the longer you wait, the more you put your institution in jeopardy. Of course, the faster you make decisions, the more you open yourself up

to criticism from those who did not participate in the decision making. But with the benefit of hindsight, we are grateful we did what we did as quickly as we did it.

A second lesson learned concerns the importance of self-reliance. When we were in Houston, we determined quickly that we could not rely on the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the insurance companies, or the White House. We knew that we had to control our own destiny. We also realized that we had to change the way we viewed the role of our institution in community engagement, both locally and nationally.

Renewal

In December 2005, we undertook the largest restructuring of an American university in over one hundred years. The objectives were to save the institution financially and to better position it for an academic recovery in the future. Both objectives had to be met, but the



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financial restructuring was absolutely essential because of our projected losses. The university was projected to lose, on an ongoing basis, \$75 million per year. The revenue base went down, and there was no way to close the gap. The only option was to reduce the costs.

We also knew that we needed to position the university for an enhanced reputation and increased quality in the future, which meant that we had to be very selective about what we did and how we did it. The alternative was to make cuts across the board. But that, I believe, is the worst thing you can do for an institution; across-the-board cuts do not recognize the fact that some units deserve more, and other units probably do not deserve as much as they have. One must make difficult decisions.

The 2006 entering class was much smaller than usual: rather than 1,400 students, we had 962. One reason for the decline was that, although we received a lot of applications, in the end parents were hesitant to send their children to Tulane. But the other reason was

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that we did not significantly compromise on the academic credentials of the incoming students. We believed that to have done so would have been to give up the 172-year legacy of the institution. Instead, we focused on increasing quality. Our strategy was fairly simple: make the undergraduate experience

as stellar as possible, and surround it with a select group of high-quality research and graduate programs.

The renewal plan had four cornerstones. The first was the undergraduate focus. Tulane already had a very good undergraduate program, but it was fragmented. Students entered through one of seven different doors, depending on their interests. That, we discovered, led to duplication of effort and inconsistency of experience. So we decided to create a single undergraduate college for all students, and to make the entire experience more campus- and student-centered. Public service is now a graduation requirement for all students, for example. Students have to live on campus longer than they did prior to the storm, and they have a common first-year experience.



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These features of the new program are not revolutionary, but they are very important.

The second cornerstone was academic realignment. We had to make some very tough decisions about a few of our schools, including the schools of engineering and medicine. Those decisions led to the consolidation of units and to an overall decrease in the size of the faculty. They were, by far, the most painful decisions we had to make, but they were necessary in order to maintain financial viability and quality.

The third cornerstone of our renewal plan was new partnerships. We are now doing things at the university that we never did before. We now have an institute for public education initiatives that reports directly to the president and focuses exclusively on the advancement of public school success. We now also have an institute focused on issues of race and poverty in our community, and we have a center for public service that organizes all of our civic engagement activities. So we created a number of new units both to advance our mission locally and, hopefully, to establish a national model.

Finally, the fourth cornerstone was to reduce by one-third the number of PhD programs

and, by reinvesting the money saved, to strengthen the remaining programs. The decisions involved in implementing our renewal plan were very difficult but, in the end, the results are not only saving our institution but also, more importantly, giving reasons for optimism about our future.

Challenges going forward

Tulane University now faces four major challenges. The first concerns the image of the university, which is largely formed by what is said about New Orleans in the newspapers and on the television and the radio around the country. Recently, for example, there was a series of articles in the *New York Times* about the increase in crime in New Orleans. There was indeed an increase; it is serious, and we are dealing with it. The same thing happens in every other city, of course, but it is not written about in the same way. Similarly, *USA Today* has reported about the mental health issues faced by our population; and, yes, there are pressing mental health issues. But there are also many positive things going on in New Orleans.

The only way we can get people to change their image of New Orleans is to encourage



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them to visit the city, see it for themselves, and then go back home and talk about it. At the university, we do “counter-messaging.” In recruiting last year’s class, we focused more on the parents than on the students. We needed to overcome the “parent factor”; we get lots of applications, the students want to come, but in the end the parents say, “no.” We are working to overcome that, and we are having a lot of success.

The second major challenge is to continue to retain and recruit faculty. That is actually going much better than we had anticipated. We lost a number of faculty members, because of both voluntary and involuntary separations, and we worried that we would be unable to hire new faculty. But in fact, we are hiring a different kind of faculty member, faculty who come to New Orleans because of what we have been through. They are not running away from the challenge; they are embracing the challenge, and that has been a real source of optimism.

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The financial health of the institution poses the third major challenge. We have recovered just a fraction of the more than \$500 million Tulane lost; but we are hopeful that, in time, we will recover the remainder. Finally, the fourth major challenge Tulane University faces concerns the

medical school. It is one of the finest medical schools in the country, and it poses its own separate challenges for the institution. But I am incredibly proud of the school of medicine, the faculty, the staff, and the students there. They have turned the corner and rebounded beautifully.

Conclusion

I conclude with two statements, one about Tulane and one about New Orleans. I have been through an unusual eighteen months in my life, and clearly I am not Pollyannish. Anybody who has been through what we have been through, and who has done what we have done, knows what it is like to have to



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survive. There is no doubt in my mind that, three to five years from now, Tulane will be a stronger and better institution than it was before the storm. I never would have wished this catastrophe on our institution, but I think our recovery is going to take a pace and have a substance to it that will make us better and stronger. And nothing I have seen in the last eighteen months changes my view of that.

I also can guarantee that, three to five years from now, New Orleans will be a better city than it was before the storm. How can I be so optimistic? Think about what makes New Orleans special. It is the only city in America that can lay claim to its own language, its own food, its own architecture, and its own music. It has a bizarre heritage and culture, but that is why people come to New Orleans. That is why tourists come. That is why those of us who are here, stay here: it is fun to be in this quirky city. New Orleans does something for you that no other city in America does. And all of those attributes remain today, and they will remain in three and five years' time.

Before the storm, we had a lot of problems in this city that we did not talk about. We did not talk about public education or racial issues or the blighted neighborhoods the way we should have. We knew the levees were not safe, but we did not talk about it. But we are talking about all of those issues now. So I have no doubt that New Orleans will be a better city in three to five years.

The only question I have about New Orleans is whether it will be as good a city as it could be if its political leadership had the courage, the vision, and a plan to make it so. We all wish that our political leaders at all levels of government had made bolder and quicker decisions about a lot of things. And I am very sympathetic because I understand the complexity of the issues this city faces. We have lost some time, but we will make it up and eventually see the fruits of our labor in our great city. □

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PODCASTS

AAC&U ANNUAL MEETING PODCASTS

The annual meeting of the Association of American Colleges and Universities was held in New Orleans, Louisiana, from January 17 to 20, 2007. The following presentations were recorded and are now available as podcasts from the AAC&U Web site.

Through the Prism of Katrina: Engaging Students in the World

By Sister Helen Prejean, author of *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* and *The Death of Innocents: An Eyewitness Account of Wrongful Executions*

And Justice for All: Using the Power of Education to Transform Our World

By Paula Rothenberg, former director of the New Jersey Project on Inclusive Scholarship, Curriculum, and Teaching

Fulfilling the Promise of a Just Democracy: New Orleans After Katrina

By Marvalene Hughes, president of Dillard University

Saving Higher Education in the Age of Money

By James Engell and Anthony Dangerfield, winners of the 2007 Frederic W. Ness Book Award

Taking the Lead on What Matters in College:

Principles of Excellence for the New Global Century

By Carol Geary Schneider, president of AAC&U, Deborah Traskell, senior vice president of the State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Company, and Blenda Wilson, president of the Nellie Mae Education Foundation

Reforming Higher Education's Hollow Core

By Anne D. Neal, president of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, Erin K. O'Connor, professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, and Candace DeRussy, trustee of the State University of New York

Tulane University: From Recovery to Renewal

By Scott S. Cowen, president of Tulane University

Using Evidence to Document Liberal Education Outcomes and Promote Institutional Change

By George Kuh and Robert Gonyea of Indiana University Bloomington, Linda Calendrillo of Valdosta State University, David Eubanks of Coker College, and Judy Ouimet of University of Nevada-Reno

How Benjamin Franklin Learned about Democracy's Values

By Walter Isaacson, president and chief executive officer of the Aspen Institute

www.aacu.org/podcast